Feminism in Translation: Re-writing the *Rights of Woman*

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In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published her Revolutionary feminist manifesto, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Provoking outrage amongst conservatives and admiration in progressive circles, the *Rights of Woman* was translated into French and German in the same year and brought the author fame in Europe. At the hands of each translator, however, Wollstonecraft's feminist message underwent distinct transformations. The anonymous French translator uses his translational choices and paratextual commentary to promote Wollstonecraft's feminist message. A note of utopian possibility sounds throughout *Défense des droits des femmes* (*Defence of the Rights of* Woman), aligning it with the deluge of political tracts and pamphlets that flooded the French literary market in the early years of the Revolution. The German translation, *Rettung der Rechte des Weibes* (*Rescuing the Rights of Woman*) was the work of the pedagogue, Christian Gotthilf Salzmann, and his employee and future son-in-law, Georg Friedrich Christian Weissenborn. By 1796, the radical Batavian, Ijsbrand van Hamelsveld, had published a Dutch version, *Verdediging van de Rechten der Vrouwen* (*Vindication of the Rights of Women*). The few scholars to discuss this latter translation have presumed that Van Hamelsveld muted Wollstonecraft's feminist voice to mollify the Dutch public. In fact, the most thoroughgoing transformation of the text occurred much earlier, in the conservative ethos of the German Nation. This article will argue that the successive translational mutations of the *Rights of Woman* reflect the cultural clashes and affinities of Revolutionary Europe.

Europe is not, and never has been, a homogeneous entity. The cosmopolitan spirit of the Republic of Letters was offset in the eighteenth century by the formation of distinct national and cultural identities, which developed in opposition to stereotypes of rival nations. In the Netherlands, for instance, stereotypes included the shallow Frenchman, the arrogant Englishman, and the dim-witted German. The Germans, for their part, mocked the Dutch for their Low German language and their flat land, the latter of which was increasingly outmoded as Gothic and antiquarian literature fuelled public enthusiasm for untamed, rugged landscapes. Political turbulence following the revolutions in North America, the Netherlands, and France contributed to this climate of inter-national factionalism. Each revolution was fired by the Rights of Man discourse which decreed that all men were born free and equal. By the time *Verdediging van de Rechten der Vrouwen* appeared, the short-lived Batavian Republic had been established in Holland under French occupation. The shock waves created by this unrest reverberated through Europe, sparking a conservative backlash in neighbouring Germany, where the ruling classes panicked and turned to literary censorship to stem the tidal wave of revolution.

The political and cultural heterogeneity of eighteenth-century Europe suggests that Wollstonecraft's tract would draw accolades from some quarters and derision from others. Political and civil rights for women and French Republicanism were, after all, closely linked. This article will consider, in succession, the versions of Wollstonecraft's feminism found in *Défense des droits des femmes*, *Verdediging van de Rechten der Vrouwen*, and *Rettung der Rechte des Weibes*.

Défense des Droits des Femmes

The *Rights of Woman* is a political manifesto with its roots in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, and the French translator's version is even more entrenched in that political context, associating male supremacy with the despotism of the monarchy and amplifying Wollstonecraft's republican sentiments. Although Wollstonecraft denounces hereditary power, she couches her criticisms in language which acknowledges that monarchs, as well as their subjects, are victims of an iniquitous system. When she writes of the 'crimes that have elevated man to the supreme dignity,' the passive verb form distances the 'men' from the 'crimes', so that the men do not sound like the specific or sole perpetrators of injustice.[1] The French translator, however, interpolate an adjective lest we forget the severity of these '*crimes atroces*', and favours an active construction in which '*des méchans se sont frayés un chemin au trône* [evil men forced their way to the throne].'[2] While Wollstonecraft describes kings simply as 'men', he exploits the French practice of making adjectives nounal to describe them as '*méchans*', while barely disrupting the rhythm of the sentence.[3] Similarly, whilst Wollstonecraft concedes that the 'very station' of the king 'sinks him *necessarily* below the meanest of his subjects,' mitigating his guilt if not absolving him altogether, the French translator emphasises his misdeeds: '*que ses vices rabaissent presque toujours*

[1] Wollstonecraft, Mary, *Rights of Woman*, *Works*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, London: Pickering and Chatto, 1981, vol.5, p.85.
[2] *Défense des droits des femmes, suivie de quelques considerations sur des sujets politiques et moraux*, Paris: Buisson, 1792, p.13.
[3] Ibid, p.13.

au-dessous du dernier de ses sujets! [whose vices almost always sink him beneath the meanest of his subjects].'[4]

Before the Terror, the most progressive exponents of women's rights were the Girondin members of the 'Cercle Social' club in Paris. These included Condorcet, Olympe de Gouges, and the Dutchwoman Etta Palm, who campaigned for French-style women's clubs when she returned to the Netherlands in 1795. The French translator of the *Rights of Woman* links the cause of female emancipation explicitly to the political events unfolding in France. When Wollstonecraft calls women 'slaves' in a political and civil sense,' and hopes that changes in the legal and educational systems of 'an enlightened nation' will 'bring them back to nature,' the translator is eager to point out that the 'enlightened nation' in question is France. His footnote continues at some length, arguing that women deserve '*une meilleure education* [a better education]'; '*le divorce, que la tyrannie seule des prêtres a pu leur ravir* [divorce, which only the tyranny of priests could take from them]'; and '*des reparations de tous les crimes gothiques de la féodalité* [compensations for all the gothic crimes of feudalism].'[5] Rights for women are bound up with the progress to enlightened government, and female disenfranchisement is associated with the feudal hierarchy.

Despite identifying himself as a man in one of his footnotes, the translator is largely sympathetic to Wollstonecraft's feminism. Accordingly, he alters her syntax to intensify her rousing imperatives. 'Let us, my dear contemporaries, arise above such narrow prejudices!' becomes '*O mes contemporaines! sortez de ce cercle étroit de préjugés; osez vous élever au-dessus* [O my contemporaries! quit this narrow circle of

[4] Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, *Works*, vol.5, p.85; *Défense*, p.14.
[5] *Défense*, p.449.

prejudices; dare to raise yourselves above it].'[6] The tripartite structure remains, but the exclamation mark and semi-colon makes each clause succinct and dramatic, with imperative verbal modes like '*osez*' bringing an extra thrill of daring to the prose. Wollstonecraft hopes that 'the Rights of Woman may be respected.'[7] The translator confidently declares that '*les droits de la Femme seront enfin comptés pour quelque chose et respectés comme s'ils doivent l'être* [the rights of Woman will finally count for something and be respected as they should be].'[8] The word '*Femme*' is capitalised throughout the translation, signalling the translator's respect for the writer and the women she seeks to liberate. Similarly, while Wollstonecraft argues that education 'raise[s] females in the scale of animal being,' the translator writes that '*les Femmes*' are raised '*dans la balance des êtres animés jusques à leur vraie place* [in the scale of living creatures to their rightful place].'[9] He strikes the same ardent note throughout, often transforming passages of speculative enquiry with the unequivocal language of a political manifesto to supra-radicalise Wollstonecraft's already controversial message.

The translator also invests intellectually in Wollstonecraft's argument that gender is a social construction. Whereas Wollstonecraft suggests that women who transgress socially-prescribed gender roles may be 'hunted out of society as masculine,' the translator unpacks the 'masculine' label in language that touches on the issues of essential gender, gendered self-representation, and the unequal distribution of political rights between the sexes.[10] The fact that liberated women risk public slander and the loss of their reputations is expressed with the verb '*se dénaturer*', which literally means 'to

[6] Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, *Works*, vol.5, p.161; *Défense*, p.224.
[7] Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, *Works*, vol.5, p.69.
[8] *Défense*, p.16.
[9] Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, *Works*, vol.5, p.74; *Défense*, p.5.
[10] Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, *Works*, vol.5, p.103.

misrepresent' but has its etymological roots in the idea of an essential, gendered 'nature', so that misrepresentation carries connotations of literal denaturing. Appearing 'masculine', meanwhile, connotes for the translator an aggressive encroachment on the rights of the male, so that women may be '*rejetté de la société comme empiétant sur les droits de l'autre sexe* [rejected from society for encroaching on the rights of the other sex].'[11] Similarly, when Wollstonecraft scoffs at Rousseau's claim that women are constantly aware of their sexuality, while men are only sexual when aroused by some object of desire, the translator intervenes to emphasise that any apparent difference must arise from social construction: '*Les hommes ne sont pas toujours hommes dans la compagnie des Femmes, les Femmes ne se souviendront pas toujours non plus qu'elles sont Femmes, si l'usage leur permettoit d'acquérir plus de bon sens et de connoissances*.'[12]

In spite of the translator's apparent determination to engage with questions of gender representation, however, the forceful language and impactful syntax of the French translation are not always favourable to Wollstonecraft's feminism. Countless critics have expressed concern that her critical attitude to women prohibits the female solidarity which, for many modern feminists, is a pre-requisite for political, social, and psychological change.[13] The problem is increased by the translator's emphatic style. Women's 'cunning tricks' become '*de petites finesses, puériles mais gênantes* [little niceties, puerile but embarrassing]' and 'a smattering of accomplishments' becomes '*une*

[11] *Défense*, p.66.
[12] *Défense*, p.317. 'Men are not always men in the company of women, nor would women always remember that they are women, if custom permitted them to acquire more good sense and knowledge.'
[13] CF: Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: ideology as style in the works of Mary Wollstonecrfat, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen*, Chicago; London: Chicago University Press, 1984; Virginia Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

teinture de connoissances, un vernis agreeable mais léger [a tincture of knowledge, a pleasing but light varnish].'[14] The embellishment of these criticisms of women does not, however, align Wollstonecraft with their male oppressors. In fact, the same emphasis is applied to descriptions of the sexual exploitation of women. When Wollstonecraft complains that men consider 'females rather as women than human creatures,' for instance, the translator presumes a very specific and troubling interpretation of the word 'women', which emphasises their disenfranchised status as objects of desire: '*considérant les femmes plutôt comme les instrumens de plaisir de l'autre sexe, que comme des creatures humaines* [considering women rather as instruments of pleasure for the opposite sex than as human creatures].'[15] The result is pronounced shifts between recognisable positions of gender-identification, so that the textual voice never has a sustained bias.

Verdediging van de Rechten der Vrouwen

The question of women's natural equality with men was a commonplace of Dutch public debate and, although the French debated the issue more fervently than the Dutch, the arguments for female emancipation advanced by Batavian and French women were virtually identical. An anonymous pamphlet, probably by Etta Palm, was published in the Netherlands in 1795, 'In support of the proposition that women should participate in the government of the country'. Catharina Heybroek and Lieve van Ollefen edited the *Nationale Bataafsche Courant* from 1797 onward and most women with a literary

[14] Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, *Works*, vol.5, p.74; *Défense*, p.12.
[15] Wollstonecraft, *Rights of* Woman, *Works*, vol.5, p.73; *Défense*, p.2.

reputation were invited to join literary societies. Even left-wing parliamentary representatives, however, only occasionally suggested that women should be given the vote. For the most part, the Netherlands was not as radical as France, and Van Hamelsveld's changeable feminist convictions are a case in point. In 1795, his journal, *De Vraag-al* [*The Obstinate Questioner*] proposed cutting the sentence from the Reformed marriage service which required wives to submit to their husbands, on the grounds that it was incompatible with 'true Enlightenment'. But it seems that Van Hamelsveld was reluctant to commit to a firm feminist position: the next edition of *De Vraag-al* contained a refutation of the original argument. Although there is no surviving copy of *Verdediging van de Rechten der Vrouwen*, extensive quotations from a 1797 review in the *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* suggest that the Dutch translation had a more conservative inflection than the *Défense*.

The reviewer also furnishes significant evidence that Van Hamelsveld was influenced, to some extent, by Christian Gotthilf Salzmann's extensive paratext, and the translational choices of Weissenborn. The reviewer mentions both a Dutch and a German translator and, according to the title of the review, Salzmann's *Einleitung* formed part of the Dutch edition. Van Hamelsveld also refers to the German paratext in his Introduction. It was common practice in the eighteenth century for foreign texts to enter a language via an existing translation. It is therefore probable that Van Hamelsveld was working from the German translation rather than the English original.

The Introduction to *Verdediging van de Rechten der Vrouwen* establishes his radical credentials, significantly with scathing reference to neighbouring Germany: 'Eer wy eindigen,' he writes, 'moeten wy nog zeggen […] dat Mrs. WOLLSTONECRAFT

eene warme voorstanderes der vryheid is, eene vyandin van alle willekeurige heerschnappye, en alle erflyke regeering afkeurt [Before concluding, one must say […] that Mrs. WOLLSTONECRAFT defends liberty passionately, that she is the enemy of all arbitrary governments, and that she disapproves of hereditary rule].' Then he delivers his parting shot: 'Omtrent het laatste is de Hoogduitsche Vertaaler niet met haar eens. – Dit, zal de Leezer zeggen, is niet vreemd! [In this last point the German translator is not in agreement with her. – That, the reader will say, is no surprise!]'[16] Van Hamelsveld's criticism of Salzmann illustrates the tension between the Batavian Republic and conservative Germany, even in spite of their literary exchange. It also shows that he approaches the modified German version of the text with a critical eye.

Like Salzmann, however, Van Hamelsveld uses his Introduction to recommend a specific reading of the feminist message in the *Rights of Woman*. He calls attention, in particular, to Wollstonecraft's claim that the virtues of the two sexes must be the same in quality, if not in degree. This statement, he writes, is 'den sleutel van het geheeke Werk [the key to the entire work]' and 'den regel, tot welken de gezegden van Mrs. WOLLSTONECRAFT moeten terug gebragt worden, wanneer zy, in haaren yver voor de eere haarer kunne, somtyds hare eischen merkelyk verder schynt te driven [the principle to which all of Wollstonecraft's remarks can be reduced, even if in her enthusiasm for her sex, she sometimes seems to push her demands too far].'[17] A cursory knowledge of Wollstonecraft's original, heterogeneous tract contradicts any suggestion that the *Rights of Woman* might be 'reduced' to a single axiom. Yet Van Hamelsveld determinedly prescribes a single view of the text, which focuses on one of Wollstonecraft's least

[16] Van Hamelsveld, cited in the *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, 1797, pp.348-349.
[17] Ibid, p.347.

radical statements. She admittedly concedes that women might not have the same 'degree' of virtue as men; but elsewhere in the text she insists that women could match men both morally and intellectually, if given access to the appropriate education and opportunities. Extolling Wollstonecraft's eloquent description of women's domestic role, Van Hamelsveld assures the reader that, although she protests against draconian limits on women's freedom, she does not insist on complete equality.

To an extent, Van Hamelsveld panders to conventional attitudes to women in the Netherlands in 1796, where even the most influential women's periodicals accepted that the duties of female citizenship were best fulfilled in the home. If he was working from the German translation, however, it is unsurprising that he regarded Wollstonecraft as a moderate advocate of women's rights, whose most revolutionary statements could be dismissed as excessive enthusiasm. The remainder of this article considers the impact of the German translation on the feminism of the *Rights of Woman*.

Rettung der Rechte des Weibes

In 1790, Wollstonecraft translated Salzmann's *Moralisches Elementarbuch* (1785) into *Elements of Morality for the use of young children*. It was a conduct book for children, which delineated the Rousseauvian pedagogical theories practised at Salzmann's school in Schnepfenthal. In his *Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'* (1798), William Godwin records a correspondence between Wollstonecraft and Salzmann which unfortunately does not survive, but appears to have grown out of the commercial success

of her translation.[18] When she sent a copy of the *Rights of Woman* to Schnepfenthal in 1792, a translation appeared that same year, accompanied by Salzmann's *Einleitung* and thirty-seven footnotes. The paratext constitutes a critical commentary on the *Rights of Woman*, which at times supports and at times gainsays Wollstonecraft's ideas. The translator, Weissenborn, was a twenty-eight-year-old teacher at Schnepfenthal. In 1796, he married Salzmann's daughter, Wilhelmine, and in 1800 published an article *Über die bisherige Zurücksetzung des weiblichen Geschlechts*, arguing for improvements in the condition of women. It seems that revolutionary feminist demands found a sympathetic ear in Weissenborn. Whatever his readerly response might have been, however, his position as Salzmann's employee and his ideological context combined to curtail his freedom as a translator.

Unlike Britain and France, the German Nation did not see any significant protest against female disenfranchisement until 1800. Although some few of the various states, principalities, and duchies were reasonably enlightened, many were still autocratic and would not have permitted the sale or reprinting of a feminist text within their borders, particularly if the local censors considered it seditious. In such a climate, Salzmann appears progressive in publishing a translation of the *Rights of Woman* at all; but his paratext marks him out as less radical than Wollstonecraft, who addressed the original English text to Talleyrand, the president of the French National Assembly.

Wollstonecraft argued that in the wake of the Revolution, men were freer, while women were still everywhere in chains. She envisaged a future for women as rational and desiring subjects and politically-active citizens, calling for: improvements in female

[18] William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of the Rights of Woman, A Short Residence in Sweden and Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'*, ed. by Richard Holmes, London: Penguin, 1987, p.226.

education; honesty in sexual relationships; and parliamentary representation for women. Salzmann cut the dedication to Talleyrand and used his *Einleitung* to circumscribe the feminist message intended for the German readership. Like Wollstonecraft, he equates the balance of power between the ruler and the ruled to that between husband and wife. It behoves each despot, he argues, to teach his subordinate to think rationally. This is an ingenious case for improving female education, but it also allows Salzmann to undercut Wollstonecraft's demand that women learn to live independently, by suggesting that the proper maintenance of the private and political status quo will benefit their education.

During the Revolution, which consolidated the idea of the bourgeois family as a microcosmic state, the mother became a symbolic guarantor of the social order, her devotion to maternal duty ensuring the physical and moral soundness of her children. Women were seen as cogs in the socio-political machine, granted or denied rights according to their impact on others. Underpinned by these ideas, Salzmann's highly pedagogical *Einleitung* presents *Rettung der Rechte* as a conduct-book for men educating female dependents to safeguard domestic tranquillity. This pedagogical focus, both in the *Einleitung* and in a series of substantial footnotes, characterises Salzmann as a progressive educationalist but belies the political thrust of the original text. He hopes that *Rettung der Rechte* 'bey vielen Weibern und Maedchen, Gefühl ihrer Würde wirken, und sie zu dem Entschlüsse bringen möge, die ehrenvolle Stufe zu behaupten, zu welcher sie der Schöpfer benimmt hat, Freundinnen, Rathgeberinnen, Freudgeberinnen, dem Manne, kluge Wirthinnen ihrem Hause, Erzieherinnen und Muster ihren Kindern zu seyn.'[19] In

[19] Christian Gotthilf Salzmann ed., *Moralishes Elementarbuch*, Schepfenthal: Verlag der Erziehungsanstalt: 1792, vol i, p.xix, 'prompts a feeling of dignity in many women and girls, and might make them decide to claim the noble roles for which the creator destined them, to be friends, advisors, joy-givers of man, sensible managers of their households, educators and models for their children.'

other words, women are encouraged to fulfil their current duties virtuously and rationally, not to challenge their place in the social order.

Although Salzmann often endorses and expands Wollstonecraft's pedagogical ideas, he admits that he also uses his footnotes to dissent from her most controversial statements. When Wollstonecraft 'declare[s] against all power built on prejudices', for instance, he intervenes to restore confidence in her agenda:[20]

> Man stösse sich nicht an diese starken Ausdrücke! Wenn man weiter lieset: so wird man finden, dass es die Verfasserin nicht so böse meynt, als es das Ansehn hat.[21]

Salzmann goes on to claim that Wollstonecraft is incapable of advocating total independence for women, vehemently reaffirming the role of the husband as 'der Versorger, der Schutz der Familie! [the provider, the protector of the family!]' Calming his male readers' fears of emasculation, he goes on to reassure them that Wollstonecraft 'eifert nur gegen jene entehrende Abhängigkeit, durch welche das Weib nur zum Ziele sinnlicher Wünsche und zur schönen Sclaven gemacht wird [is only inveighing against that degrading dependence, through which the woman is merely made into a lovely slave and object of lascivious desires].'[22] The footnote closes with a narrower definition of the terms at stake than Wollstonecraft's original text offers, so that 'Unabhängigkeit [independence]' is understood as freedom from slavery, rather than personal and economic self-determination. Salzmann's footnotes dominate the page, so that his counter-arguments are often developed more extensively than the arguments of

[20] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol.5, p.170.
[21] Salzmann, vol.ii, pp.31-32. Do not be offended by these strong expressions! If you read on: then you will find that the authoress's meaning is not as wicked as it seems.
[22] Ibid, vol.ii, pp.31-32. He is after all the provider, the protector of the family! She only inveighs against that degrading dependence, through which the woman is merely made into a lovely slave and object of lascivious desires.

Wollstonecraft's original text. The textual debate is therefore weighted heavily in his favour.

The cumulative effect of the footnotes is such that the reader experiences a hybrid text, rather than a political manifesto. Three voices emerge from the translation: Wollstonecraft, the author; Weissenborn, the translator; and Salzmann, the editor and commentator. The struggle for dominance between these voices radically re-shapes Wollstonecraft's text. Readers in Germany and the Netherlands therefore experienced, not the *Rights of Woman*, but a manifestly different text from the English original.

Working in tandem with Salzmann, Weissenborn frequently tones down the original text, inserting qualifying adjectives to dilute divisive passages. Wollstonecraft makes her conception of 'masculine women' clear in the Introduction:

> If by this appellation men mean to inveigh against their ardour in hunting, shooting, and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind; - all those who view them with a philosophical eye must, I should think, wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine.[23]

In Weissenborn's translation, the call for 'more and more masculine' women sounds less provocative by virtue of the qualifying phrase 'in diesem Sinne [in this sense]', which emphasises that this masculinity should be confined to 'those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character.'[24] Similarly, when Wollstonecraft claims, 'I may be allowed to doubt whether woman were created for man,' Weissenborn inserts the qualifying adjective 'bloss' – 'simply'- which dampens Wollstonecraft's fiery statement and aligns her prose more easily with the softness thought natural to women:

[23] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol.5, p.74.
[24] Salzmann, vol.i, p.7.

'so wird man mir doch erlauben, den Satz, dass das Weib bloss um des Mannes Willen geschaffen sey, für's erste noch zu bezweifeln [I may be allowed to doubt whether woman were created simply to follow the will of man].'[25]

Conclusion

Where Weissenborn's translation fails to subdue Wollstonecraft's feminism, Salzmann's *Einleitung* and footnotes mitigate or dissent from her most revolutionary statements. The net result is a German version of the *Rights of Woman* which, while appearing to engage in dialogue with Wollstonecraft, diminishes her radicalism. It was this enfeebled text that Van Hamelsveld encountered. His Batavian sympathies make him critical of Salzmann's political convictions; but it is clear that *Rettung der Rechte des Weibes* influenced his perception of Wollstonecraft's feminism and, as a result, the version of the *Rights of Woman* made available to the Dutch readership. By contrast, the anonymous French creator of *Défense des droits des femmes* makes Wollstonecraft's feminism even more radical, on the whole, than that of the *Rights of Woman*. His translational strategy reflects the utopian spirit of the early days of the French Revolution. The cosmopolitan ethos of the Enlightenment ostensibly ensures that Wollstonecraft's feminist ideas cross national and linguistic borders, but as they meet and clash with the diverse ideologies and political systems of eighteenth-century Europe, the distinctive language of her Revolutionary feminism is transformed. Consequently, her emancipatory message is at times amplified and at times subdued, but always distorted.

[25] Wollstonecraft, *Works*, vol.5, p.148 ; Salzmann, vol.i, p.288.

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